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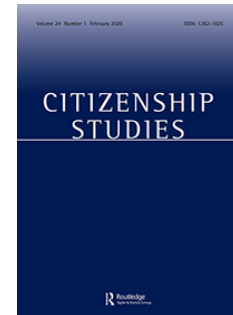
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# Public Activism: Queering Geographies of Migration and Social Inclusivity

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## Abstract

This article contributes an original critique at the nexus of public art, activism (i.e. public activism) and migration alongside the promotion of inclusive change. It pushes at transdisciplinary boundaries by integrating geohumanities scholarship on socially engaged public art whilst adopting a queer theory approach to foreground and interrogate the socially marginalised. The focus is on Schellekens & Peleman's multi-site *Inflatable Refugee* installation, in response to the topical migration question, and the public performances and discourses that surround the migrant figure. An in-depth critical discourse analysis drawing from an interview with the collective and key documentation critically probes into the uses of public art(ivism) to raise issues particularly around the (mis)representation of this migrant figure. The case study evinces ambiguous modus operandi of public activist practice. Although it may promote inclusive citizenship through 'queering' identity politics and migrant hyper-visibility, the material and socio-spatial affordances (along with limitations) of public activism do not necessarily develop its full potential.

## Keywords

Public art; activism; migration; queer theory; social inclusivity; *Inflatable Refugee*

## Introduction

The *Inflatable Refugee* gazes blankly into the distance. Has he<sup>1</sup> arrived at a safe haven or will he be refused and be sent from whence he came? His sheer size allows him to look over and beyond us and keep watch on the horizon, not limited by borders or documents. It makes him inescapable, undeniably present. (Schellekens & Peleman 2016, NP)

The travelling 6 m-high *Inflatable Refugee* (Figure 1) by the Belgian art collective Dirk Schellekens and Bart Peleman<sup>2</sup> is a timely and ongoing mobile, multi-site public exhibition. It was launched as artistic response to the apogee of the European 'refugee/migrant crisis' in 2015. The terminology in this context depends on perspective. It, therefore, calls for an acknowledgement of the major impact of political and social category uses on the representation of (in)voluntary displaced people, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers<sup>3</sup>, and their proposed treatment (cf. Goodman, Sirriyeh, and McMahon 2017).

**Figure 1.** The entry of the *Inflatable Refugee* to Venice. Photo credit: Dirk Kinot. Courtesy Schellekens & Peleman.



The *Inflatable Refugee*, self-funded by the collective, has been exhibited mostly for a couple of days across the waters of cities including Venice (Figure 1), Ostend (Figure 2), Copenhagen (Figure 3), Helsingor, Mechelen, Melbourne, Uppsala, Vejle and Breda. The artists based their site selections on a combination of place associations with the 'refugee crisis', local interests and practical considerations.

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**Figure 2.** *The Inflatable Refugee*, Ostend. Photo credit: Ian Cox. Courtesy Schellekens & Peleman.



**Figure 3.** *The Inflatable Refugee*, Copenhagen: steering a middle course between material backdrop and social activation? Photo credit: Anton Corbal. Courtesy Schellekens & Peleman.



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I render the *Inflatable Refugee* as an aesthetic attempt to hold up a mirror to society (cf. Boal 1985) and question issues around social inclusivity, taking into consideration the mediated, often exclusionist narratives of the migrant figure. This article focuses on public performances and discourses as well as practices of everyday citizenship that surround this figure. It attends to the aims and challenges of the possibly inclusive potential of the artwork in hand in terms of what it 'does' to people and place in response to the topical migration question.

The article presents a critical interrogation into the *Inflatable Refugee* as an example of public art, and activism in a more radical rendering. The research has pursued a case-study design (Yin 2013), drawing from a critical discourse analysis of an in-depth interview of 3 h with the collective and their then agent Anouk Focquier in Ghent, Belgium, on 15 May 2017. Photo-elicitation (cf. Rose 2012) was used as part of the interview process to uncover the artists' narrated places memories of the installation. The analysis has been carried out in triangulation with conversational topics as identified in key documentation, including quality news media and communications of the collective, as well as wider interdisciplinary scholarship at the nexus of public art, activism and migration.

Public art can be permanent or temporary and is widely described as free-to-experience creative work designed for public and bodily accessible sites (cf. Cartiere and Zebracki 2016). 'Public activism' is the portmanteau of public art and activism. I construe this neologism as arts practices in public-accessible sites which, in this case, address/redress social marginalisation through galvanising critical thought and promoting inclusive change. This study employs public activism as critical lens to think through how the pressing refugee crisis confronts everyday social practices. Public activism has come in fashion since the global financial crisis of 2007–08 to describe mostly bottom-up artistic responses that have been largely anti-globalist in nature (Danko 2018). This fits in with an understanding of public art as a further expanding field beyond established institutions, conventional curatorial and consultative practices, formal uses of funding frameworks, and engagements of traditional art world audiences (cf. Zebracki and Luger 2019).

As particular novel contribution, this study establishes a trans-disciplinary niche by pursuing the radical possibilities of queer theory and queer methodologies for challenging norms and binarisms through its examination of the possibilities of activism. Queer theory has moved beyond initial key concerns with deconstructing the identity of sexual minority subjects alone. Over time it has integrated a much wider concern with identity politics and forms of social and systemic oppression. Moreover, the queer approach, as developed in this case study, interlinks epistemic perspectives around socially engaged public art and activism (i.e. public activism) and processes of social inclusion and exclusion part and parcel of marginalisation. Prompted by queer theory, a socially intersectional perspective (cf. Crenshaw 1991) is key to a nuanced understanding of such complexity. The latter attends to the lived realities that cut across, amongst others, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, belief, (dis)ability, political reference, and particularly relevant here, migration status.

The next section provides a substantial elaboration of the queering approach in dialogue with scholarship at the intersection of public art, activism and migration. This is

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followed by a critical discourse analysis of the inclusive potentials and limitations of the artwork in question. The paper concludes with ways forward for analysing public activism around issues of social inclusivity through a queering approach, both in theory and practice.

## Queering public activism

This study, as argued above, adopts queer theory as a novel approach to considering minority subjects in public-art practices. Since its emergence in the 1990s, queer theory has found wide resonance as critical mode of inquiry within socially engaged scholarship. Originally, queer was used to describe sexual and gender-variant communities, especially the non-heterosexual 'other'. But it has come to stand for much more and something different than a reference to the 'other' alone. It has become widely recognised as a compound intellectual and practical 'project' (cf. Ahmed 2006). Queer entails an ongoing concern with 'thinkings' and 'doings', which challenge disciplinary and social norms and binaries through fluid articulations of intersecting social identity markers and expressions (i.e. intersectionality; cf. Crenshaw 1991). Following queer standpoint theory, the queer project is political in its problematisation of positionality (cf. Namaste 1994). As put by the Mary Nardini Gang collective in their manifesto *Toward the Queerest Insurrection*:

Queer is not merely another identity that can be tacked onto a list of neat social categories, nor the quantitative sum of our identities. Rather, it is the qualitative position of opposition to presentations of stability – an identity that problematises the manageable limits of identity. Queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white-hetero-monogamous-patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalised, otherised and oppressed. (Mary Nardini Gang 2011, 256)

Queer, thus, wants to question, or 'que(e)ry', as much as it wants to instigate material changes to systems of oppression and identity politics. As Boellstorff (2014, 284) put it: 'th[e] notion of being within the that which one critiques is at the heart of the notion of "queer": transforming that which dominates'. The term queer, as such, has come to encompass a form of methodological activism, a method of 'queering'. It is both knowledge (*episteme*) and practice or action (*techne*) (Jones and Adams 2010) – where the verbal/gerundial use of queer (i.e. queering) particularly denotes an activist stance (cf. also Zebracki 2017). As Sullivan (2003, 192) argued, to queer is 'to describe a process, a *movement* between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them' (*italics added*). Whilst queering methods challenge social norms and practices, Browne and Nash (2010) alerted that those very methods should be scrutinised as well to prevent normalisations, or 'queer orthodoxies' in research practice.

Queer theory, in its wider application, has called pointed attention to the 'liveable' (or rather precarious) lives and spaces of the socially marginalised (cf. Butler 2004). Translated to this particular case, I provide explicit weight to migrant and minority positionalities within the

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context of public art, traditionally dominated by the majority positionality of 'formal', 'permanent' citizens. To what extent is the 'other' provided with a place in belief (episteme) and action (techne)?

This study offers a renewed, 'queering' critique of the potentials and challenges of activist practice for engendering inclusive change. Inclusive public art practice could take the form of the promotion of public communication and transparency, consultation and bottom-up participation, and so on. Thus, inclusivity entails a sliding scale; that is the extent to which (all) members of the publics are involved in the design, execution and everyday engagement as part of the public art process. Claims on deemed 'inclusive' benefits often manifest themselves in communications of artists and policymakers about the material and 'human capital' investments they make in public art, especially when local communities are (allegedly) involved (cf. Zebracki and Palmer 2018). Such claims may as well serve as vehicle to document accountability to local authorities as well as communities and should therefore be carefully gauged (cf. Zebracki and De Bekker 2018). Indeed, as Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison (2005, 1019–20) argued: 'the value lies in unmasking the rhetoric that surrounds the use of culture – including the [inclusive] benefits claimed for public art'.

There is small but significant scholarship on the implications of when activism drives public art in terms of social interaction, medium use and spatial intervention. For example, Mekdjian (2018), in reference to Lemoine and Ouardi (2010) and Lindgaard (2005), conveyed that activism, or 'activism through and by art', can be understood as 'a critical process that destabilises everyday urban interactions and practices ... [It] brings together diverse creations, whether they take the form of verbal or visual signs, graffiti, maps, installations or performances, that all have social change as their political purpose' (Mekdjian 2018, 39).

So, public activism is antagonistic in nature and may involve multiple media and subversive modes of thinking and practices that may challenge the status quo, the legitimacy of ruling powers and the authority of 'the artist' (cf. Bishop 2004; Mouffe 2007). Yet, the existence or continuation of subversive, or 'radical', public arts practices can be particularly challenging when it depends on public funding and sanctioning through the remit of local authorities (cf. Trumble and van Riemsdijk 2016).

Public activism usually involves grassroots, unsolicited and unregulated actions. However, this does not preclude activist practices arising from formally commissioned frameworks and trained artists, such as in the case in hand, and collaborations between artists as facilitators with members of the public as co-creators (cf. Zebracki 2016, 2017). Public activism, in this sense, has some common ground with Bourriaud's (2002) notion of relational aesthetics. That is to say, it lays emphasis on human experience and relations that define the social production of the arts space beyond its material context alone (cf. Lefebvre 1991).

Massey and Rose (2003) indicated how social relation is an integral part of public art. They considered the degree of the negotiation of social difference, or social relationality, of quintessential importance to defining the 'publicness' of public art. An artwork would not be public if such negotiation is absent. But when it does it 'open[s] up space to the political'

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(Murray 2016, 47), especially when motivated by activism which critically contests, amongst other aspects, social customs and norms, moral values and legislative contexts.

The visual too is an integral part of public art. Subversive arts tactics may involve a visual politics of foregrounding, and politicising, social difference and exclusionary practice (cf. Danko 2018). Accordingly, public activism attempts to challenge social structures that may preserve, and underplay, social inequalities and dominant uses of public spaces that have invisibilised the socially marginalised. The visual may, thereby, unlock a particularly great potential of art as 'politics of activism' (Kester 1998). This resonates with Rancière's (2003) understanding of politics as an 'aesthetic in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible' (226).

Following Rancière (2015), this does not mean that art(ivism) is political in itself. The political is a space of potential; something becomes political when it challenges structural (in)equality issues within the public sphere (which are inextricably bound up with normalities of the state and society). The political, then, is situated within dissensus rather than consensus, with the former determining the political heart of radical democracy and inclusive praxis (i.e. critical thought *and* action) (cf. Rancière 2015).

Queer theory has nonetheless remained a rather absentee interlocutor within a public activist context. Fortier (2001, 406) argued that 'queer theory is decidedly located within the postmodern anti-essentialist critique of identity', where it could indeed challenge hegemonic identity markers, such as gender (i.e. male), ethnicity (i.e. white), and sexuality (i.e. heterosexuality) (cf. Deutsche 1996; Zebracki 2017). The method of queering involves a commitment to a (re)reading of social practices in the everyday life in simultaneous dialogue with theory on such practices. Therefore, I think that this method can be particularly helpful in, amongst other avenues, pushing disciplinary boundaries and social norms and categories, articulating and establishing space for social difference, denouncing social injustice, and promoting inclusive change through critical intervention.

## Reference cases

For the framing of the case study on the *Inflatable Refugee*, I find it helpful to connect the method of queering with some notable documented case studies that have specifically engaged with (mis)representations of migrant subjects within arts contexts. Through the queer reading of the nexus of public activism and migrant positionalities, these examples are used to demonstrate how, in the words of Berlant and Warner (1998, 558):

the queer[ing] world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematised lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.

Various scholars in the body of scholarship around public art practice, activism and migration have engaged with the visibilisation of invisibilised minority 'others', including the

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homelessness and migrants. Notably, drawing from Krzysztof Wodiczko's *The Homeless Projection* (1986), Evans (2008) discussed how the city and citizenship should be rendered a 'multi-voiced body', promoting 'the solidarity, heterogeneity and fecundity of the city' (234). By the slide projection of images of homeless people on symbolic buildings and place architecture in New York's Union Square, the author argued how it subverted the city's homogeneity, hierarchy and permanence. Evans (2008) rendered this installation as an act of citizenship that gave a voice, and thereby political significance, to people living on the city's margins who have remained particularly silenced in the face of urban regeneration.

Wodiczko's oeuvre holds ongoing key interests in issues around belonging, alienation and migration. Conlon and Gill (2013) discussed Wodiczko's *Mouthpiece (Porte Parole)* (1993; variants with Joshua Smith, 1995–97), which solicited displaced people to wear a small video monitor over the mouth in cities such as Paris, Angers, Amsterdam and Warsaw. The artist wanted to elicit curiosity and invite viewers to come close(r) to enable exchange amongst strangers to find 'common strangeness' (ibid., 256) – thereby queering the familiar of everyday urban life. Conlon and Gill (2013) argued how this creative piece of technology became 'integral to their identity and visibility' (243), 'liberat[ing] the individual by allowing them to speak yet their speech is also constrained by the device' (244). In other words, the migrant visibility symbolised a paradox of freedom, 'a contradiction between assertions of the right to free speech – common in liberal society – and immigrants' experiences' (ibid.).

Despite the small scale of the disruption through *Mouthpiece (Porte Parole)*, the authors ascribed significant importance to how the socio-material relation destabilised hegemonic subjects and categories (migrant, liberal citizen) and experiences (belonging, alienation). This finds resonance with Hughes and Forman's (2017) argument on the material politics of citizenship. They, in the context of migrant detention centres, contented that 'materials [including artwork] are more than mere bystanders: they actively facilitate and mediate particular encounters that enable certain kinds of [political] claim[s] to be made' (678).

On political strategies of the (in)visibilisation of migrants, the anthology edited by Marciniak and Tyler (2014) proffer other compelling examples at the crossroads of artwork, activism and migration, such as Rozalinda Borcilă's performance projects (2001–02) on borders and migrancy to challenge binaries around citizen/foreigner in the US context. Azra Akšamija's *Wearable Mosques* (2005) design project is an illustration of the potential of artwork to contest Islamophobia within the purview of anti-immigrant propaganda across Europe and North America. Another salient example is Lena Šimić's ongoing *Becoming British* migrant's arts project since 2009, which developed into a collective and anti-deportation campaign that defied the contradictory UK regime of citizenship (which, for example, exports 'liberal democracy' whilst sustaining brutal immigration control, as the collective conveyed).

Across the above anthology, a cogent argument is developed around migrants' hyper-visibility (cf. Tyler 2006) in the everyday public life. Criticism is directed against how, in particular, mainstream media and state politics have produced an overdetermined, stigmatised and homogenous imagery of displaced people as 'the migrant' – rather an 'abject citizen'. Such over-exposed imagery through media and public discourse might risk operating

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as surrogate of the voices and lived experiences of migrants (cf. Tyler 2013). Here, I concur with Marciniak and Tyler (2014) that there is rich potential for artistically informed activism to 'confront forms of "common sense" and "status quo" around migration' (18).

There is particular potential for digging up voices and experiences of migrants in interactive and live affordance of situated arts practices. This happens in a somehow literal sense in the case of Tania El Khoury's *Gardens Speak*, which opened at Birmingham's Fierce Festival in 2014. The embodied experience was put central in this sound installation (i.e. a form of activated spectatorship; Bishop 2006). Members of the audience, as the artist argued, 'are asked to interact: physically, politically and emotionally. They quite literally have to dirty their hands to uncover the story and to make an effort to uncover the truth' (*The Guardian*, 29 September 2014). Participants had to literally dig in soil to discover a cushion that contained an audio file. They had to place their head on the cushion to listen to 'fragments of stories' of 10 Syrians that were buried by their families at home. This all happened during the uprising against the repressive Syrian regime led by its president Bashar al-Assad, which gave rise to the outflow of millions of refugees. Also El Khoury's artwork told to be wary of how the politics of hyper-visibility may work its way through migrant identity-making: 'these individual histories are not part of the grand geopolitical narratives that are unfolding and get reported in the [W]est. They are the history below, the histories that seldom get told' (ibid., NP).

Following Amoore and Hall (2010), the problem around such politics of hyper-visibility is fundamentally related to the ever-entrenching security architecture of state borders and urban public space, banalising the dire realities faced by migrants and displaced people. As put by De Genova (2015, NP): 'the law that illegalises migrants remains largely invisible, while the spectre of the devious and cunning migrant becomes hyper-visible through mass media representations of border policing' (cf. also Demos 2013). Interestingly, Amoore and Hall (2010) considered the orchestration of these spaces as a form of border theatre and discussed how security rituals themselves have become the object of art. They illustrated the example of Marcos Ramirez's 10 m-high wooden Janus-faced Trojan horse, towed into the San Diego-Tijuana border checkpoint in 1997. The authors drew an analogy with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre in how this artistic intervention operated as an 'interruption or arresting of sequences' (301). The artist realised that this would have been inconceivable in the post-9/11 'border anxiety' climate (299).

Elsewhere, Amoore and Hall (2013) discussed activist protest by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) at the gates of a detention camp at Calexico/Mexicali at the US-Mexico border in 2007. They argued how this example of dramatic and theatrical art 'position[ed] the figure of the clown in close proximity to the sovereign drawing of lines that differentiate between safe and dangerous, legal and illegal, inside and outside' (94). The trope and antics of the clown-fool created confusion about the right to space. Following Agamben (1998), the clown is a *homo sacer*, an outcast of society and the epitome of 'bare life'. Although the clown does not have a visible place in law (and, in extension, in a biopolitically controlled society), the in situ action, the authors argued, showed that the clown was not stripped from the (micro-)power to transmit the message that the detention camp is a 'coming' space imbued with 'life and conviviality' instead (108).

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The convergence of art, activism and migration, as illustrated by the previous examples, I think, brings to light the relevance of queer phenomenology through asking 'how we arrive at the places we do' (Ahmed 2006, 2). This alludes to the notion of 'becoming queer', which, as Ahmed (2006) argued, implies 'how the strangeness that seems to reside somewhere between the body and its objects is also what brings these objects to life and makes them dance' (163). This chimes with Fortier's (2001) idea of migration-as-homecoming, queering the reclaiming and re-imagination of home 'as a destination rather than an origin' (407–408). Homecoming is particularly complicated when one never returns 'home' (Probyn 1996). Through a concern with movement and desire, this process is queering the familiarity of home as 'originary moment' (Fortier 2001, 408). It is here where queer scholars make a thought-provoking connection between migration and sexuality's diasporic nature: 'sexuality is on the move' (Sánchez-Eppler and Patton 2000, 2).

Queering, in this case through the medium of public artwork, demands an anti-essentialist interrogation into predisposed formations of identity and place. Problematically, they are bounded by the cartographies of the self/other, native/stranger, civilised/savage, home/there, here/destination, host/guest, etc. (Ahmed 2000; Fortier 2001). Such cartographies privilege the ways wherein the '(st)able host', i.e. the uncriticised coherent city, configures and trivialises 'un(st)able migrants' within an assumed hospitable cosmopolis (cf. Iveson 2006).

Against the background of the above literature and reference cases, the case study in hand, thus, contributes new grounded understandings of socially engaged scholarship at the intersection of public art, activism and migration. As novel analytic tenet thereby, this study adopts queer theory to pursue issues around the politics of materiality as part of the process of social engagement with public art. In more concrete terms, the study focuses on the role that a mobile, transitory, material work of public art may play in mediating, and queering, the privileged vis-à-vis marginalised positionalities of artist, viewer, and the depicted/viewed subject. The case study, by the incorporation of a migration-centred topic as part of its research niche, adds new knowledge to the breadth and depth of public art literature in particular. It does so, specifically, by engaging the activist, and subversive, potential of public art practice to provide new critical reflections – and critically modulated projections – on (more) inclusive ways of living with difference through the migrant figure.

## Ethics and methodology

Some final comments need to be made concerning this study's complex ethical environment, especially with regard to engaging, and the (mis)representation of, the migrant figure. The interviewees provided me with a unique opportunity to access first-hand experiences as relayed by the collective. Also, the collaborative and confidential context of the interview allowed the sharing of ethical and moral understandings of the place of the very own artistic and research practices, privileges, authenticities and responsibilities within the wider power structures that surround the marginalised migrant positionality and the migrant figure as study subject.

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Darling (2017) made a plea for ‘fuller engagement’ with forced migration and the city. Drawing from published scholarship, in this place, I would like to frame the ethics of who has the right to make, and represent, migrant artwork. So, what may be the ramifications of migrant-inflected art-making as well as using such artwork as study object? Notably, Marciniak (2017) reviewed the photograph of Ai Weiwei, mimicking the lifeless body of the drowned Syrian refugee toddler Alan Kurdi who was washed ashore on the coast near the Turkish resort of Bodrum in September 2015. The author’s critique of this widely circulated and discussed image (taken on Lesbos, Greece, in January 2016), or rather spectacle, related Weiwei’s attempt – that is, ‘opening ... a certain poetic space ... [to] at least hope to change how we think about the problem’ – to the quintessential question: ‘what can art do for refugees?’ (ibid., 1). Marciniak (2017) argued that this artwork has been largely criticised for being an ‘unethical appropriation’, a politics of grievability – described by Butler (2015, NP) as ‘a presupposition for the [precarious] life that matters’. The author concluded that Weiwei’s photograph, nonetheless, should be rendered with ambiguity, as ‘it strays from the aestheticisation or sublimation of trauma’ in such pictorial/artistic migrant representations (Marciniak 2017, 10). Also, somewhat relatedly, I am mindful of Valentine’s (2008) caveat against pursuing ‘a worrying romanticisation of urban encounter ... and implicitly reproduc[ing] a potentially naïve assumption that contact with “others” [in this case through art-based representation] necessarily translates into respect for difference’. Perhaps, in other words: ‘lived experience does not guarantee knowledge’ (Ratcliffe 2005, 140, cited in Marciniak 2017, 9).

Furthermore, Tania Canas, the Arts Director of the Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees (RISE) advocacy organisation produced the thought-provoking manifesto ‘10 Things You Need to Consider If You Are an Artist – Not of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Community – Looking to Work with Our Community’. This manifesto pointedly stated that artistic engagement with migrants cannot be without them. Canas (2015, NP), in a critical manner, contended that ‘the artist often claims to want to show “the human side of the story” through a false sense of neutrality and limited understanding of their own bias, privilege and frameworks’. One of the manifesto’s key points is that artists should understand the difference between presentation and representation. Canas (ibid.) alerted to the risk of producing grand narratives and reducing migrants to ‘an issue’, dismantled from social diversity and rhetorical nuance. As another key point of the manifesto imparts: ‘we are whole humans with various experiences, knowledge and skills. We can speak on many things; do not reduce us to one narrative’ (ibid., NP).

The RISE manifesto, thus, provides artists working at the crossroads of activism and migrants with ethical guidance for queering matters, including: what is appropriate? How much space can be taken up? When is it time to step back? And how are certain power dynamics reinforced through public art practice? (ibid.) To counterbalance, an interesting public comment on this manifesto cast criticism of how the NGO (i.e. RISE) monopolises such questions at the same time: ‘why throw suspicion on artists in the first place? They are part of keeping topics alive and rising new ones, more differentiated than the media machinery can produce?’ (*e-flux conversations*, 15 October 2015).

The RISE manifesto called for (self-)awareness and an integration of situated knowledges (Haraway 1991), also at a methodological level relevant to the case study in

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question. This feminist tenet acknowledges the 'privilege of partial perspectives' for queering the self/other, artist/public, etc. Also, it embraces the inductive value of a single empirical narrative to pinpoint structural social problems (such as displacement, precarity and exclusion) (cf. Gorman-Murray et al. 2018). By that, this tenet puts central the methodological rigour of (self-)reflexivity on positionality and power in lieu of aiming to produce a coherent representation of the research subject (cf. Zebracki, Doucet, and De Brant 2018). Queer methodologies do so in a wider attempt to challenge hegemonic sites of knowledge production that often legitimise 'official' views, in particular cis/white/male hegemonies (cf. Ahmed 2006). Therefore, the (con)text of the 'inter-view' worked in a dialectic fashion, both as resource (i.e. a reality outside the interview) and topic (i.e. a reality co-constructed amongst the interviewer and interviewee) (Rapley 2004, 16).

## Navigating between gazing and participating

The previous framework, including reference cases, provides a platform for queering the *Inflatable Refugee*. I realise how the collective not only conceived of it as an artistic concept but also as an anti-normative act of activism. The installation was travelling, temporary and thereby anti-permanent. In addition, I consider it a floating and somehow moral compass. It has been challenging place and identity and fathoming many problematic binary paradoxes, notably 'us' (host/home) vs. 'them' (stranger/there). Such binary faculties of thought often feed public, heated debates that may be remote from, and depreciate, the everyday lived realities of the marginalised subject in question. As brought out and challenged in the previous section, queer theory unsettles such oppositions through a concern with intersectionality (cf. Crenshaw 1991) to advocate a critical public pedagogy (cf. Zebracki 2019). The latter interrogates how social identity markers and segmentations are compounded – which, as conveyed in the Introduction, straddle ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, belief, (dis)ability, political preference, geographical descent or nationality, etc.

The case-study analysis has uncovered a socio-relational dialectic between 'just' gazing and critical participation, which is subject to deeper reflection hereinafter. I do so by queering the findings on public art and activism along interrelated registers of promoting inclusivity, antagonising practices, and engaging ethically.

## Promoting inclusivity

First and foremost, the artists asked themselves to what extent the installation – chiefly through its visual language and communicated meanings – has opened up inclusive spaces and facilitated intercultural understandings and meaningful encounters. The below excerpt conveys the collective's art-for-all principle, an attempt to connect localities and communities for a common future:

*Dirk:* [The *Inflatable Refugee*] makes people think in a highly polarised debate. We want to equip people with an alternative point of departure. It's a very surreal figure

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that invokes questions without providing cut-and-dried answers ... The sculpture gives pros and cons. We ask whether [the refugee] is a big problem or a great opportunity, without slipping our own convictions.<sup>4</sup>

*Bart:* The reason for us to work in public space is to reach a wider audience that did not ask to be confronted with art. This is the yawning gap between gallery art and art in public space.

*Dirk:* Indeed, where engagement is condensed on the walls.

*Bart:* There's a thin line between art and engagement. It's an ambiguous reality ... Good art opens itself up for multiple opinions. But engagement is imbued with ambiguity. Art should push further than just postulating things. The artwork needs to add something. By seeing it you'll need to make a statement. It gets interesting how the artwork judges you.

An interesting observation to make here is how the proclaimed 'thinking beyond binaries' within queer theory is somewhat contradicted by the above binary articulation of whether the refugee is 'a big problem or a great opportunity [read: solution]'. This calls in question Goodman, Sirriyeh, and McMahon's (2017) point about the paramount importance of language, or judgement by category use, in migration discourse:

The terminology used is not simply a neutral way of reporting on what is happening, but instead works to present those involved in different ways – as either deserving of sympathy and refuge or as a threat to (different parts of) Europe ... that may need to be dealt with through force (ibid., 112).

In beholding their arts practice as activism, the collective wanted to employ the size (6 m in height), material (polyester) and location (urban water) as symbolic counter-responses to the spectacle of 'the refugee'. Akin to El Khoury on *Gardens Speak*, the collective argued how the migrant figure has become magnified through mass media and geopolitics. Does the *Inflatable Refugee* involve a powerful verdict on migrant's hyper-visibility? (where migrant borderlands have been turned into mass media spectacles). The above excerpt's closing sentence explicates that the collective does not want to reach such judgement. Rather, they render it an invitation, conferring agency on members of the public to fill in this space on their own terms.

The artists explained how they drew inspiration from the response of Eva Rovers (2017a) to Albert Camus' *L'Homme révolté [The Rebel]* (1951). Rovers propagated 'common-or-garden' activism, termed 'practivism' (Rovers 2018), to make a 'real-world difference' in a postcolonial world. Following Camus, Rovers contended that *klaarluchte denken* [Dutch for 'enlightened thought'] remains topical: '[it] is required to revolt, thus to be human: no communist, no believer, no consumer, but human' (Rovers 2017b, translated from the Dutch).

Such revolting behaviour was manifest in the telling example of how CIRCA established an in situ theatrical space defying the banned existence, rights and political life of

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migrants at a detention camp at the US–Mexico border. With this reference in mind, the *Inflatable Refugee* was perhaps a less immersive intervention and a different mode of becoming. The collective may have employed the installation as a public discussion piece (cf. Kester 2004), an opportunity to activate questions about human lives behind the mediated migrant figure. They suggested how the imag(inari)es of this migrant figure allowed (privileged) observers to mentally transport themselves into perilous conditions faced by migrants. The artists concurred here with Camus and Rovers (as referenced above) to be receptive, not just tolerant, towards social difference and, consequently, adopt empathic modes of self-reflection and activation through activist arts practice.

The artwork, in its conception, was felt by the collective to move away, in a sense quite literally, from the spectacle of the refugee. In so doing, they tried to assert what it is to be humane and invite viewers to participate in what they hope would be a meaningful conversation about an ‘inclusive urban mundanity’:

*Bart:* We wanted to place an iconic figure in the city, regardless of whether this figure is male or female.<sup>5</sup> We’ve used the same material, polyester, as used for those poor boats bringing refugees to Europe. Combined with the life jacket, the work adopts a similar vulnerability. His posture and facial expression are expectant. It’s due to his size that he’s able to look over the city without documents.

*Dirk:* The size tells us about how the West looks at refugees. He’s entirely on his own, yet the clenched posture is similar to all boat people ... This surreal image is important. We notice much fear in public debate. By departing from a surreal image we try to take the sting out of it ... We noticed how strangers struck up conversations about it.

*Bart:* Yes, local residents and visitors.

*Dirk:* People started asking questions themselves. The artwork has opened up ways for new insights.

The material politics of the public artwork poses some (ironic) limitations to the expression of migrant vulnerability (cf. Hughes and Forman 2017). Following RISE manifesto’s point on queering presentation vis-à-vis representation, how can a piece on public display – in many cases targeted at art world audiences – benefit migrants? How could the top causes of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean be represented by a public artwork? The presentation of the migrant figure in a life jacket in the form of an inflatable artwork, who is, therefore, being prevented from drowning, may put constraints on relaying impact (such as dismay, discomfort and insecurity). In other words, the installation may raise questions about the politics of grievability – in other words, do we care (enough) and how? (cf. Butler 2015).

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## Antagonising practices

As a targeted public discussion piece, the collective explored pathways through this installation to counter highly polarised migration debates within politics and society. This point heralds the analytic register of antagonising practices; a context in which the collective selected the exhibition locales with circumspection:

Which places work well and where do we stay away from? A shopping centre, for example, would incite sensation, which wouldn't go well. The image is fragile and we don't want to misuse it, also not for putting ourselves in the picture ... People's responses should come into their own. We guard very hard from provoking for the sake of provoking.

Thus, the collective's site selections deliberately wanted to avoid sheer provocation. Their intention was to create spaces for meaningful encounter, thereby making a plea for careful grounding of the artwork within the local community to press home a 'pause-and-reflect' message. Nonetheless, Dirk argued that the installation 'should precisely allow to cause friction and leave room for difference in opinion ... The less ambiguous, the less impact'.

In a sense, the latter aligns with Rancière's (2015) provision of dissensus for learning about and bridging difference, as put central in the politics of art here. Simultaneously, difference defines the aesthetics of politics as 'a way of framing ... a specific sphere of [differential] experience' (ibid., 160), which partitions and navigates the 'visible' and the 'sayable' whilst producing statements and making potential real-world impact (ibid.; see also Rovers 2018). In order to avoid effacing the visibility of difference, the collective's former agent, Anouk, imparted that, in the first place, the collective found it of primordial weight that the intent and context 'feel right' and 'in place' and dissociate from 'sensationalising' art (which may level out difference).

The collective strikingly discussed their selection of Venice, a harbour city widely known for its trading and migrant history including tourists – who can be considered migrants, too – who govern its place image today (Figure 1). The artists explained how the *Inflatable Refugee* floating on the canals of Venice, in their reading, was an attempt to enhance the complexity of the social divisions and geographical borders that have canopied the fabric of this city. Thereby, they wanted to antagonise lines drawn between residents vs. tourists, the Western self vs. subaltern migrant-other, and the urban centre (Italy's 'prosperous North') vs. rural periphery (Italy's South as migrant's access point).

The collective's reasonings about meaningful encounter also involved the notion of alienation. The collective illustrated this point with another example of the *Inflatable Refugee* on Ostend's beach, whilst screening photos of this exhibition on their notebook during the interview. They argued how a sunny day, which flocked many beach tourists, served as effective décor for contrasting mass-mediated (and often grim) beach scenes at refugees' gateway to Europe with 'flows of normality' (Figure 2). As the collective posited:

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*Dirk:* We set up the work on the beach on an early morning but waited a bit with inflating until the beach got thronged with people, so that it would really catch the eye ... We expected people to keep away from it, but we actually experienced a sense of acceptance.

*Bart:* Well, people appeared to be largely unconcerned like 'I'm making my sandcastle here, so I just carry on'. Everyone's in a script that is suddenly thwarted by the Refugee ... It doesn't naturally belong there. It asks people to hold on and give time and space to think about it, as if a pause button is pushed in.

*Dirk:* Yes, the artwork got really close.

In the collective's reading, the image(ry) of the artwork activated spectatorship (cf. Bishop 2006), where the observer becomes participant. Put central here is the embodied, multi-sensorial encounter, which is queering dichotomies of the spectator (i.e. the resident, self, here) and the spectacle (i.e. the refugee, other, there). 'This is what we want, that things stop, just for a moment. It's important to take time and space to dwell on things', Bart said. Nonetheless, we should also ask: what does the *Inflatable Refugee* want from the viewer? How much space is taken up by artists and viewers, and is this perhaps too much? (cf. RISE manifesto by Canas 2015) How much voice is given to the migrant experience in the parameters of this work that cannot 'speak'? (cf. Conlon and Gill 2013 regarding the freedom paradox around migrant visibility). Again, there are some limitations in this case compared to the more live affordances as we have seen in *Gardens Speak* and *Mouthpiece (Porte Parole)*, amongst others.

Furthermore, the collective especially identified the dilemma of turning consumerist public spaces, found to be eviscerated from deeper engagement, to meaningful sites of engagement. For example, they illustrated how they found the *Inflatable Refugee* to fall in a something antagonising niche of the contemporary art festival Crystal Ship in Ostend, 2017. The artists indicated that the festival organisers tried to put this seaside town on the tourist map, mostly through creating large-scale murals that adorned facades throughout the city centre. Beyond this deemed decorative role of public art, the collective rather wanted to trigger interaction and unleash empathic reflection on the migrant figure.

Fortier's (2001) idea of migration-as-homecoming, as a dialectic of queering, provides a compelling entry point for considering how the *Inflatable Refugee* may have informed public discourse far beyond the artists' original intents and the installation's original exhibition locales. Images and imaginaries that have been especially circulating, and proliferating, over dominant social media outlets, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, have queered dichotomous understandings, including home/there, here/destination, and offline/online. That is, digital interactions seem to be inextricably bound up with offline 'footprints' (e.g. selfie-taking; Figure 3). This composes a mash-up of 'heres' and 'theres' of the digitally and socially networked images of the *Inflatable Refugee*. This may have made the migrant figure incoherent, more particularly within an 'incommensurate' geography (cf. Berlant and Warner 1998) of the artwork's material origins/locales, destinations, sites for engagement and public discourse, which all surround the migrant figure.

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Relevant to the above context, the collective conveyed how they, overall, experienced the public discourse about their installation to be primarily driven by polarisation, the trademark of today's digital image culture in their view. Social media played a distinctive, antagonising role in the public perception of the *Inflatable Refugee*, Dirk argued: 'some radical-right outlets drove a dividing wedge ... It's so easy to polarise and condemn'. Such polarised digital culture may have become cloaked in social divides and bigoted and xenophobic currents (cf. Zebracki and Luger 2019), indicating privileged norms and exclusionist, discriminatory positionalities that queer theory as well as activist practice precisely want to refuse and unsettle.

In this light, despite the artwork perhaps being, in a sense, an inflatable 'still life', the collective warned against reading 'static' images without knowing the lived stories behind them. They conveyed that some people to them looked indifferent toward the installation in online photography, arguing that the visual may produce a 'static' message about dynamic, complex problems in society (cf. Danko 2018). The collective approached their own work as an exemplary, 'offline' extrapolation of merely the umpteenth news image of the migrant figure – which they wanted to put directly in the face of the beholder. Their installation, as such, might have pronounced a visual politics, if only as catalyst of mental change, shifting attention to the socially disenfranchised. The collective experienced first-hand how some pictured, 'static' people were engaged in earnest conversation in situ.

Nevertheless, the collective's former agent argued that, 'when an image [i.e. the refugee] enters a community without being asked for', debates become fraught with antagonism – on the street, online, in council meetings, and so on. Although the collective argued that they have been able to 'do their thing' in full artistic freedom, some locations they proposed proved to be contentious in local politics. On request, they clarified this point in an email (in Dutch, translation below) to me on 26 July 2019:

The goal of the *Inflatable Refugee* has always been to provoke discussion. That's what happened, also from a political angle. At Mechelen's council meeting there were interpellations of Vlaams Belang [Flemish nationalist far-right, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islam party]. At the same time, there were fascinating discussions about what role art can play in public space. Mayor Bart Somers has always responded in the figure of a citizen's father. He gave the *Inflatable Refugee* an apolitical welcome speech. In Breda [the Netherlands], there was a lot of criticism from the PVV [Geert Wilders' far-right Party for Freedom, akin to Vlaams Belang]. In some cities, there was political pressure not to put the *Inflatable Refugee* in certain symbolic locations, such as on a balcony of a town hall.

Whilst the *Inflatable Refugee* proved to be controversial in some places close to 'home', on the other side of the world, the then mayor of Melbourne, Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, bid the *Inflatable Refugee* a warm welcome. Doyle attended the installation at the Yarra River bank in June 2017, declaring that it portrayed 'the human cost of conflict' (*The Age*, 17 June 2017), and subsequently signed a Refugee Welcome Scroll, just before World Refugee Day, June 22. The mayor's declaration might be read as the promotion of 'good' citizenship:

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The artwork aims to help break down stereotypes about refugees and it highlights the difficult journey that people make in fleeing global conflicts ... By signing this declaration we are making a commitment in spirit to welcoming refugees to our communities, upholding the human rights of refugees, demonstrating compassion for refugees and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in our community. (ibid.)

However, a public blog post ('Vluchteling' [Dutch for Refugee], *De Laatste Vuurtorenwachter*, 3 April 2017) wittingly commented on the *Inflatable Refugee's* limits, as reified by its static material representation: 'maybe this refugee is enthusiastically welcomed by the fact that he is not made of human material' [translated from the Dutch]. Hence, solidarity claims that ensue from material politics of citizenship (cf. Hughes and Forman 2017) would (or should) require ethical attention too, as I discuss in the following.

### ***Engaging ethically***

Public activism asks for critical participation on the part of members of the public as much as it entails an ethical commitment on the part of the artist/s in the event of, and eventing around, public artwork. Combining the ideas of social relationality (Massey and Rose 2003) and 'becoming' (cf. Ahmed 2006) with the collective's discourse: art and place are never public in and of themselves. They *become* public through the aesthetics, and ethics, of social relations – i.e. mediations amongst (co-)creators (cf. Zebracki 2016, 2017). The artists' rendering of their social investments through work of art evokes Bourriaud's (2002) understanding of art as a dialogical process, 'a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion' (15).

As live engagement with audience members has been front and central in the work ethic of, amongst others, El Khoury in *Gardens Speak*, the collective's commitment implicated interactive visits to their chosen exhibition venues. There, they entered into dialogues with people in situ, including residents, visitors and journalists. The first encounter with the artwork is vital and evocative, Dirk said:

The entry is a really important moment, as it tells the whole story. It gives free reign to people's fantasy ... The work communicates universal values, the real matter of how people seek a better life.

This point not only reveals an association with the aforementioned theatrical performance pivotal to CIRCA's clownesque activist protest. Also, it foregrounds the material politics of citizenship (cf. Hughes and Forman 2017), where the materiality of the artwork is more than a 'bystander'; it mediates meaning whilst confronting the viewer. As Dirk conveyed: 'we heard an interesting response from a man on the [Ostend] sea dyke. We re-encountered the same man a few hours later, saying: "thank you for the wake-up call"'. The key message, Dirk acknowledged, was not always readily understood by passers-by (i.e. 'becoming'): 'it takes the fullness of time to see the human story behind it'. Notwithstanding, the collective revealed some critical thoughts about the sincerity (and socially permissible nature) of some of the

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utterances and self-realisations of members of the public. Another anecdote at an arts festival in the Danish town of Vejle illustrated the latter point, too:

The *Inflatable Refugee* was presented on a pontoon in a bay. One of the residents of the trendy new-build apartments didn't like the work; it blocked his way and ruined his view of the bay. When the arts festival was over, he came to us again to say that he had got used to the presence of the *Inflatable Refugee* and that he was going to miss him. (Dirk)

Although the migrant was put in the mental picture through the form of the artwork, the collective tried to push their engagement further by involving actual migrants in their accompanying resident-refugee penfriend project *Moving Stories*, introduced in Antwerp:

Dirk: When we collaborated with the [local] refugee aid organisation, we found twelve people willing to write a letter as a way to send a direct message to their *fellow citizens* [emphasis added]. In collaboration with the refugees, the letters were translated into the Dutch and posted with stamped reply cards. They could choose which mailboxes the letters were put in.

Anouk: This made an invisible net visible. People were connected, otherwise they would never get in touch with each other.

Dirk: We wondered what the work could bring for the people whom we're talking about, so *Moving Stories* added a real social component. Residents invited refugees over, which had direct, heart-warming results.

*Moving Stories* was an attempt to produce a sense of compassion and solidarity beyond, if it may, an ephemeral appeasing of one's conscience, or a feel-good story. The RISE manifesto imparted the importance of awareness of social positionality and the ensuing ethics of participation. The latter, according to this manifesto, is not necessarily 'progressive or empowering' despite 'good' intentions, as Canas (2015) critically asserted:

Your project may have elements of participation but know how this can just as easily be limiting, tokenistic and condescending. Your demands on our community sharing our stories may be just as easily disempowering. What frameworks have you already imposed on participation? What power dynamics are you reinforcing with such a framework? What relationships are you creating (e.g. informant vs. expert, enunciated vs. enunciator) (ibid., NP).

The *Moving Stories* project was a concerted effort to show grassroots commitment through the collective's collaboration with migrants, residents, social workers and local authorities. The project was also rolled out in cities including Uppsala and Copenhagen. In such serialisation of arts practice – 'packaged' and transferred to other localities – it might be a recurrent challenge to connect with local, and 'glocal', audiences. The collective yet argued to work from inside site-specific communities each time, in this case involving the process of writing,

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disseminating and reading paper letters as perhaps a deliberately slow method in line with the ethics of the project:

*Dirk:* Many letters were really personal, so we sought after institutions of trust.

*Bart:* We enjoyed the confidence of the Red Cross in Uppsala ... The letter is an old-school medium, of course no tweet of 140 characters [i.e. Twitter's traditional character limit, red.] ... There were quite some distressing stories that stopped your thought for a moment.

Notwithstanding, building on the RISE manifesto, scrutiny of the working method is important to address the 'nuanced differences between organisations and projects. Just because we may work with the same community doesn't mean we work in the same way' (Canas 2015). This manifesto also highlighted the value of examining solidarity work that has already been done as well as the art of carrying out such work in a way that is meaningful to the communities concerned – hereby pointing to the pedagogical potential as an integral part of critically engaged art (cf. Rancière 2015; Zebracki 2019). The collective's former agent discussed how they attempted to connect the *Inflatable Refugee* to a symposium dedicated to community work and social service delivery around migrants. They contended that this drew wider interest in both the artwork and topic, hence again revealing it as a discussion piece and mode for public participation.

Furthermore, not only took the collective the site selections into due consideration for thinking through what art could do (under their own conditions). Also funding played a role in ensuring such artistic autonomy and the continuance of the project. Trumble and van Riemsdijk (2016) argued that market conditions and partners are, indeed, necessary to art for coming into existence in the first place.

A community-driven, circular funding model facilitated the continuation of the collective's work. In a clarifying email, dated 26 July 2019, the collective wrote to me (in Dutch, translated here): 'we financed some of our projects through crowdfunding campaigns. Through the Ministry of Culture, we were able to make use of their assistance in foreign presentations. The income generated from the presentations and the sold work is used to finance new projects'. Thus, the collective's mode of engaging involved a great deal of financial independency, making it a crucial element in making self-governing decisions.

The collective explained in that same email that, albeit they self-funded the *Inflatable Refugee* in the first place, they worked together with X-Treme Creations for the production of this inflatable: 'the company was sympathetic to the goal of the project and saw potential for a return on investment due to the possible media attention. As a result, they sponsored a portion of the production price'. In this place, it would be interesting to know if, and how, migrants' (exploitative) hyper-visibility may work through, perhaps unconsciously, in collaborating partners' commitment to public activist practices around issues of migrancy.

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## Discussion and conclusion

This case study on the *Inflatable Refugee* has adopted queer theory, taken as a form of methodological activism (cf. Jones and Adams 2010), as novel lens for queering the ambiguous public performances and discourses that surround the migrant figure at the nexus of public art and activism. The analysis has signalled possibilities and limitations of public art(ivism) in promoting inclusive change, pursuing antagonising practices, and engaging in ethically sound ways. These registers have particularly highlighted issues around migrant hyper-visibility and related identity politics, as they have been mediated through the material and socio-spatial dimensions of public activism. In the following, I present a concluding synthesis that signposts some wider directions for future research and practice to address the socially marginalised through artistically informed activism in the public sphere.

The *Inflatable Refugee*, along with the 'migratory geographies' of this travelling exhibition, served as critical response to the mass-mediated, often stereotypical migrant figure. Through the visual impetus of the artwork and motives of movement and border crossings, the collective endeavoured to make this figure identifiable and the migrant issue relatable (and perhaps more heartfelt, too). The artistic intent resonated with queer theory's aim to challenge essentialising identity politics and power hierarchies around the socially marginalised, i.e. the migrant figure, to relay how identity is in a state of constant flux. However, the public artwork – through the reification and material 'upscaling' of hegemonic migrant imag(inari)es – may have well co-contributed to migrant hyper-visibility. Considering this paradox, an interesting avenue for further empirically driven inquiry would be how identity-making is troubled in the artistic presentation and representation of minority subjects. How do artists' positionalities stand in relation to the possibilities (as well as possible exploitations) of activist practice? Such critical dialogue should, then, attend to how the interplay between public art and activism may advance inclusive encounters and place attachments and, accordingly, reconfigure spaces of belonging and alienation.

This study has endorsed the view that public space is not merely a backdrop for activism but it entails an active social process pinpointing higher-order politics: 'the interval created by urban activist translation must be understood, in both its temporal and spatial dimensions, as a delimited, ephemeral and disruptive event or space' (Suchet and Mekdjian 2016, 234; cf. also Conlon and Gill 2013). New understandings may arise from the repurposing of activism beyond its original location and uses. It would be of interest, for example, to develop further critical understandings of how public activism – either commissioned or unsolicited – might be appropriated, or 'hijacked', for particular social and political claims and recuperations.

As such, public activism may be adopted, or co-opted, across different and possibly antagonising community and institutional actors. This would require an expanded understanding of sites for activist engagement, as it may assume numerous and differential spaces, material shapes, experiences, ideas, and new politics of 'becoming' (cf. Ahmed 2006; Fortier 2001). Such reconfigurations may shed new light on the 'sites and scales of answerability' (Isin and Nielsen 2008): how can the relationship between citizenship and how

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this is enacted in the everyday public life be queered through the perspective of activist engagement?

This case study has, moreover, emphasised public activism as a possible socio-cultural development methodology, implying a focus on process rather than product (cf. Canas 2015). It implicates an ethics of engaging – and thereby a politics of recognising – the socially marginalised. This study's queer approach to the compound mediums of public art and activist practice has been particularly rendered as a project of 'becoming' – seen through forging solidarities across social identity and migration status. Nevertheless, vigilance is called for in making hyperbolic claims on 'inclusive' and 'progressive' qualities of public activism. Critical reflection is needed on who simultaneously does, and who does not, benefit from the activist process – and any (further) exclusionary subjugations (cf. Marciniak 2017).

To conclude, I suggest construing public activism as queer criticality: a laboratory to activate *(re-)thinkings* (episteme) as well as *(re-)doings* (techne) to promote inclusive modes of citizenship – departing from community and minority interests, beyond the intents of artists and commissioners. (Self-)reflexivity on positionality is, therefore, a *sine qua non* in such activist practice. This is perhaps a worthy reminder of RISE's manifesto that, 'if you're an artist who wants to make work about the growing refugee community' (*e-flux conversations*, 15 October 2015), the space for making, viewing and participation is 'anti-neutral':

Our community has been politicised and any art work done with/by us is inherently political. If you wish to build with our community know that your artistic practice cannot be neutral. (Canas 2015)

## Notes

1. The mass-mediated, patriarchal image of the migrant figure has informed the collective's choice of the male figure for their installation.
2. The research participants have provided consent for being named in the analysis. Given that this collective is readily traceable, I realise that full anonymity is impracticable in this place.
3. As noted by Mekdjian (2018), while dominant news media often use interchangeably, or rather indiscriminately, the terms 'migrants', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers', the UN differentiates between these terms as, respectively, (in)voluntarily displaced persons in a state or across international borders, persons made disinclined to fall under the protection of the country of citizenship due to fear and persecution, and persons seeking protection in a country other than the country of citizenship (where the latter two terms indicate legal statuses).
4. All interview quotes in this article are translated from the Dutch language.
5. See Note 1.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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**Martin Zebracki** is an Associate Professor of Critical Human Geography at the University of Leeds, UK. His research straddles the areas of public art, sexuality, digital culture, and social inclusivity and has been published in journals such as *Progress in Human Geography*, *Urban Studies*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Social & Cultural Geography*. Zebracki is joint editor of the Routledge anthologies *Public Art Encounters* (with Joni M. Palmer; 2018) and *The Everyday Practice of Public Art* (with Cameron Cartiere; 2016), and he is Editorial Board Member of *Public Art Dialogue*. Moreover, he is the Principal Investigator of the multi-site research project *Queer Memorials: International Comparative Perspectives on Sexual Diversity and Social Inclusivity*, supported by a grant awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

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